

Gender Violence

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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Dames at Sea: Life in the Naval Academy

CAROL BURKE

Reflecting on the much publicized Tailhook scandal, in which naval officers allegedly assaulted twenty-six women (several of them fellow officers), I recalled a lovely cool September morning in 1984 during the first semester of my seven-year tenure teaching at the Naval Academy. To a civilian whose only connection to the military was an old photograph of my father in a World War II uniform, the place was spectacularly impressive: the Severn in the distance, glassy and still; the gray stone buildings, massive and proud; the grounds a deep green even after a dry summer; and the orderly rows of ginkgoes fanning their gold leaves in unison. As I walked to Sampson Hall, the oldest building on the yard, I heard the approach of a group of midshipmen, running in formation and chanting in guttural tones: "Rape, Maim, Kill Babies. Rape, Maim, Kill Babies, Oorah!"

Marching chants ("cadence calls," as they are referred to in the Navy, "jodies" in the Army), along with the drill they accompany, help inculcate—often with a dose of irony—a strong, corporate identity. Typically, they oppose the longing for loved ones with the celebration of a new life as a member of the group. In cadence calls, a kind of early white version of rap music, trainees sing of the unfaithful girls they've left behind: "Ain't no use in goin' home,/Jody's got your girl and gone." But they also talk of compensation for such loss: "I don't want no teenage queen./I just want my M-16." Cadence calls not only instill mutual solidarity but resurrect the Casey Jones of American ballad tradition as a brave fighter pilot who survives the crash of his plane only to subdue women with greater ferocity.

Climbed all out with his dick in his hand.
Said, "Looky here, ladies, I'm a hell of a man."

Went to his room and lined up a hundred . . .
Swore up and down he'd fuck everyone.

Fucked ninety-eight till his balls turned blue.
Then he backed off, jacked off, and fucked the other two.

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Sadomasochistic cadence calls have increased since women entered the brigade of midshipmen in 1976. A version of the traditional song "The Prettiest Girl" portrays a woman appreciative of the violence she receives at the hands of a midshipman:

The ugliest girl I ever did see
was beatin' her face against a tree.

I picked her up; I punched her twice.
She said, "Oh, Middy, you're much too nice."

In the necrophilic chant "My Girl Is a Vegetable," midshipmen celebrate sex with a comatose girlfriend:

My girl's a vegetable
She lives in a hospital.

(chorus)

I'll do most everything
To keep her alive.

My girl's a paraplegic.
Making love is so strategic.

(chorus)

My girl ain't got no eyes,
Just two sockets full o' flies.

(chorus)

Sometimes I even play a joke,
Pull the plugs and watch her choke.

Other Naval Academy practices celebrate violence toward women with the same gusto. Members of the Male Glee Club, a group of ambassadors for the Naval Academy, entertain themselves on bus trips home with a lurid variation of the popular song "The Candy Man":

The S&M Man

Who can take a chain saw,
Cut the bitch in two,
Fuck the bottom half
and give the upper half to you . . .

The S&M Man, the S&M Man
The S&M Man cause he mixes it with love
and makes the hurt feel good!

Who can take a bicycle,
Then take off the seat,
Set his girlfriend on it
Ride her down a bumpy street . . .

Who can take an ice pick
Ram it through her ear
Ride her like a Harley,
As you fuck her from the rear . . .

Although a large number of commissioned officers receive their training at Officer Candidate School and at several naval ROTC programs on college campuses, the midshipmen, the faculty, and the administration of the Naval Academy generally believe that it is the academy that "sets the standard for the Fleet." The institution's undergraduate regimen of rigorous academic studies, strenuous athletics, and confrontational leadership training produces, according to most members of the academy community, officers best qualified to assume the Navy's top positions, as indeed most of them do.

In the 1870s Congress condemned as hazing the assumption of authority on the part of upper-classmen at the Naval Academy to physically abuse or verbally humiliate underclassmen. Despite congressional condemnation, physical abuse continued in the form of ritual paddlings and demeaning practices like the game of "Cuckoo Clock," in which a plebe was ordered to crouch under a table and stick his head out as fast as he could saying, "Cuckoo," before being swatted with a newspaper by hovering upper-classmen.

A "no touching" rule was finally enacted two years ago, and physical abuse has dramatically lessened. But routine verbal insults continue through a system known as "Plebe Indoctrination." A freshman who has failed to memorize one item on the day's menu must submit to the public verbal abuse of an upperclassman. For example, the upperclassman may yell, "You aren't worth a piece of dirt on my shoe," to which the plebe will respond in one of only four permissible responses: Yes, Sir. No, Sir. No excuse, Sir. I'll find out, Sir. Those upperclassmen who delight in applying this humiliation day after day are known as "flamers"; their victims as "shit screens."

Women students at the Naval Academy face the same indignities during their plebe year as do their male counterparts. But they must learn to cope with more virulent forms of ridicule deeply rooted in Naval Academy traditions. On Sunday nights each company awards "the brick" to the midshipman whose date (or "drag," in academy jargon) is judged the ugliest of the weekend. After "Pig Pushes" (dances to which girls from private schools in the Baltimore and Philadelphia areas are bussed), the midshipman who dances with "the biggest pig" wins a pool of money collected from his fellow company members. On the dance floor, a midshipman may rub his fingers and thumb together behind the back of his partner, signifying his eagerness to claim the winnings at the end of the evening.

Periodically a "Hog Log" is maintained by midshipmen working in the main office where a visiting date checks in and awaits the midshipman who has invited her. Should a visitor be branded as unattractive, her name is entered in the "Hog Log." In recent years officials have banned such practices, yet many of them continue unofficially in the

Hall, where upperclassmen exercise casual intimidation and midshipmen are reluctant to incriminate one another.

Although upperclass male and female students may date during leave hours, a male midshipman known to be dating a female midshipman may be "branded" by the rest of his company. In this ceremony his pants are pulled down and a "W" (for WUBA) "branded" with boot blacking on his buttocks. The acronym WUBA was first used in 1976 to describe the freshly issued uniforms of the first female midshipmen: Women's Uniform Blue Alpha. The expression began to appear in misogynist graffiti ("WUBA Go Home!"); as jokes slipped into productions of *The Masqueraders*, the academy drama group; and as offensive catcalls. Although censored, the expression enjoys wide currency today at the Naval Academy, sometimes jokingly said to stand for "Women Used By All." WUBA jokes circulate quickly among the brigade of midshipmen:

How are a WUBA and a bowling ball similar?

You pick them up, put three fingers in them, and throw them in the gutter.

What do you call a mid who fucks a WUBA?

Too lazy to best off.

What's the difference between a WUBA and a warthog?

About 200 pounds, but the WUBA has more hair.

The majority of the male student body stigmatizes women midshipmen as overweight and promiscuous. Ironically, with the intensive physical regimen required of all students, an overweight midshipman, male or female, is rare. When any students exceed their approved weight by a few pounds, they find their names and excess pounds posted on company bulletin boards. To many civilian faculty and outsiders, female midshipmen seem underweight.

Male midshipmen learn early that there are two sets of insignia to be earned: one based on military performance, the other on masculine prowess. They sport Chiquita and Dole banana stickers on the insides of their hats to mark each time they have had sex with a date on academy grounds. The Chiquita sticker signifies "scoring" in one's room; the Dole sticker, anywhere on the grounds.

Earning one's "brown wings" is common parlance for having engaged in anal intercourse with a woman. One female freshman complained of the sexist E-mail she and other women received almost nightly by anonymous midshipmen, including verses like the following:

I love my woman dearly
We get together yearly
And although she said it stings
I still earned my brown wings.

Women at the Naval Academy learn to accept silently what many view as intimidation. Like their male counterparts, they quickly learn that complaining of mistreatment is viewed as a sign of weakness and draws unwanted attention to them. Their immediate

supervisors, upperclassmen who have themselves withstood humiliating abuse and whose job it is to test these recruits daily, favor those who stoically withstand interrogation and intimidation.

An informal group calling themselves "Webbites" shamelessly practices bigotry. Adherents of James Webb, former secretary of the Navy who in a visit to the Naval Academy several years ago referred to female midshipmen as "Thunder Thighs," this group has evolved over the past decade from a collection of outspoken critics of women in the military to a secret society, one that in 1991 referred to itself as the "WUBA KLUX KLAN" and solicited new members to further its goal of ridding the Naval Academy of women. Female midshipmen know that they may someday be required to serve under a former "Webbite" or that their commanding officer may be a member of the last class at the Naval Academy to graduate with no women, a class in which several members inscribed on their class rings "LCWB" (Last Class With Balls).

In response to widely publicized discrimination, the Navy has adopted the philosophy that although it cannot change the way people think, it can regulate behavior by identifying and proscribing all forms of sexist and racist behavior. There is little evidence that such regulations have produced the desired effect. As long as high-ranking officers wink at humiliating rituals and spontaneous acts of debasement, as long as they accept these as inevitable pranksterism (or "high jinks," as Admiral Virgil Hill referred to the handcuffing of a female midshipman to a urinal), such behavior will continue, if not as an expression of the fighter/jock ethos fueled at the Tailhook convention, then as other forms of abjection. We have a right to demand of the Navy and of its premier institution, the Naval Academy, a basic standard of decency, one we expect of all public institutions in a democratic society.

In a recent interview, J. Daniel Howard, undersecretary of the Navy, declared, "Americans don't want a naval officer to behave like just any person in society. They expect a higher standard of behavior." In fact, when we insist that assailants be prosecuted, we invoke no "higher standard of behavior." When we condemn those who witness a crime but fail even to notify police, we demand no superior moral standard than the decency and responsibility that come with citizenship. What happened at the Tailhook reunion was both traditional and criminal. Although a thorough criminal investigation may identify the perpetrators and others who sought to inhibit an investigation, the deep-rooted misogynistic traditions that breed such behavior will be harder to uproot.